

arden 2011





arden

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kocian award winners

prize for fiction

Chace Webb, *You Have 13 New Messages* 12

prize for non-fiction

Matthew Bassie, *Phone Call From Winter* 72

prize for poetry

Vanessa Escobar, *My Psalm Number 150 entitled: beads* 38

prize for art

Tim Torok, *Destruction of Memory* 27

editor's note

Editor in Chief. The words rolled around on my lips like a puzzle that needed solving. What in the world was I to do? My friends smiled and congratulated me, my family hugged me and said how proud they were, and of course I was left with the three words. What did they expect of me? Soon after the first few *Arden* meetings, I realized that I needed to lead this journal to new heights. Cue cheesy inspirational music. I knew I wanted this year's issue to be the best yet, but I wasn't sure how to do it. I sought to bring *Arden* to a new level, to make the journal for the students by the students. Then I started forming a list of goals I wanted for *Arden*. More staff, more events, more submissions. In writing, we are often taught that less is more, but with a literary journal, more is better. With more submissions, we have the opportunity to choose the best for the journal.

With the help of my staff I realized that *Arden* did not just need more but it needed the best. The staff is what makes *Arden* the success that it is. They are dedicated students that have given their time and their qualifications to *Arden*.

We hoped to strike a chord with different students and bring out the best in their works for the submissions; this was accomplished through the efforts of the Creative Writing Program and Art Programs at Columbus State University. And after months of anticipation, the submissions finally came in. I was astounded by not only the quality of work but the amazing talent that was displayed in each submission.

When John Kocian decided to create a literary journal for Columbus State University, he wanted to showcase the abilities of the English Department. Through the years, the journal has expanded beyond the English Department to include all students from different programs across campus.

After a long year of hard work and help from the amazing staff I have learned what those three little words mean. It is not a title to lead a journal but to be a part of a group of people. People that are passionate about literature and art, about writing and creation. This year's issue represents the students. The students who went beyond their homework and their projects to create for themselves. These students are the ones that have helped *Arden* grow and change, and I can only hope that it will continue.

Deena Brabant,
Editor in Chief

reflections on arden in its 13th year

The idea of *Arden* occurred in the fall of 1998. The original vision was very simple, a journal of creative writings and visual art. I asked around and learned of *The Spectrum*, an earlier literary magazine on campus from the 1980s and used that as a precedent. Dr. Noreen Lape agreed to be the sponsor and recommended a list of approvals and permissions I needed for an on-campus publication. The list looked like a who's-who of the current campus administration. They all approved and, with the support of the English department, this project was born.

The name of the journal came from a Shakespeare class I was taking at the time. The naming of the journal proved to be a great challenge; no idea seemed to fit. Then while reading *As You Like It*, we talked about Northrop Frye's idea of the "green world." This world was an unruly place that erases all of the conflicts made by the rules of society. In the play, the Forest of Arden served as the setting for this world. I thought the name fit the vision I had for the journal as a great equalizer-- professors and students submitting and publishing work on an equal field.

Thumbing through the last 12 issues, I see many outstanding aspects of what *Arden* has become. I admire the aesthetics and the quality of work. Then I open to the table of contents for each one and read the names. That's where I find that which I admire the most. I read the names of people who have sought the outlet that I always hoped this little journal would one day become. I see names of students directly above those of professors, equals on the page. I see the names of colleagues, the names of classmates, even the names of former students. I see the names of some of this town's best English teachers and the names of those who have left to pursue greatness elsewhere. All of these contributors chose to share their voice through the pages of *Arden*, and to all of them, I am grateful. The journal has become the wonderful representation it is today because of the hard work of every editor, every advisor, and every member of the English Department, past and present. To all of them, likewise, I am grateful.

John Kocian,
First Editor in Chief

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My teacher reads Rick Campbell's Dixmont aloud
Because no one had brought their books.
My ears go back and forth, moving to be moved
by Rick's words but found they could hear nothing.
Instead, while my teacher paused-then went on,
I played with the edges of lined paper.

My eyes moved to be moved but it was clear
I wasn't there. If he were to call my name as
I imagined he might have had he seen my expression,
to ask what I was thinking about.

Was it Rick's words that floated, endlessly on?

No, I would tell him. I was thinking of your mouth
and how your bottom is full but not too full and the
top is just thin enough and rosy, almost painted on.
And how they look when your teeth grin and when you eat.
How I felt your breast instead of kissing you before you
fell asleep and how I can only think of how your mouth stopped,
the color drained, lips barely there, full of. . . of something,
when I told you to tell me the truth.

He's acting up again.
Calms down after he
devours a garbage can
and some unlucky deer.
His fur is tie-dyed with
cotton candy gunk and
bleached by the sun.
Circular cigarette burns
freckle his tummy while
his feet are covered with
parts of the earth.

He'll always listen
when you need him and
won't judge you on
how bad your singing is
or flicking off the church
van that obviously did
not have the right of way.
He'll pant when you make
him run too long and leaks fluids
in parking lots and front lawns.

200, 518 miles.
He is about to die.





First unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:34pm:

I know you're there. Why don't you answer? I don't have much time, you see there is something you need to understand. Just let me explain. The room is dimly lit by the fading light of dusk. A few rays of the sun desperately cling to the bed, refusing to go gently into that good night. So they go violently. But nevertheless, they go. The room is empty, save for a bed, and the phone...the phone is red. There's also this warmth that grows colder with every passing second, like a body that's been stabbed repeatedly.

Message deleted.

Second unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:39pm:

I know you can hear me. The walls and ceiling are an off-white color, like everything else, almost perfect, but just "off" a bit. They're stained with nicotine and the almost imperceptible grief of sleepless nights...the phone is red. The bed is stripped of sheets that were once as black as the dilated pupils of a man who is caught off guard by just how much pain the human body can endure before it shuts down.

Message deleted.

Third unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:43pm:

The ceiling fan turns gently with the rhythm of a clock. Constant motion with no destination. The cobwebs still cling to the blades as they gently cascade through the air. The blades were once white, but time has buried them beneath a layer of dust, diminishing their once brilliant, innocent color and consigning them to the same imperfection as the walls and ceiling...but not the phone, the phone is red. The white is like that of a corpse whose life runs screaming from it.

Message deleted.

Fourth unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:46pm:

The tips of the ceiling fan are black. They float on the outer rim of the fan's circumference. Their darkness is like that of the shadows cast in the tunnel that waits at the end of a life's journey. This dark hue, in contrast with the blades that blend in with the ceiling, makes the tips appear to be black vultures eternally circling their prey, waiting for the last bit of energy to die out so that they may ascend and devour. They will not have to wait long...the phone is red.

Message deleted.

Fifth unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:49pm:

There's also a picture on the wall. I must not have remembered it earlier, something...something else must have been holding my attention. But yes, there is a picture on the wall, but the picture itself is irrelevant. It is the glass that is important. Because in the right light the glass becomes just as hauntingly

reflective as any mirror, reminding you that no matter what you do, someone is watching, even if that someone is you. The light that causes this glass to turn looking-glass is like the light emitted from the fires burning in a man's eyes once he has been pushed to the breaking point and decided to go out in a bloody mess. Reflected now are my eyes, blood-shot...as red as the phone.

Message deleted.

Sixth unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:55pm:

Once the carpet was as grey as the sky in the midst of an oncoming storm, but now as I lay upon it, it is the grey left in the wake of a torrent. It is that and many other colors...like the red of the phone. The stains that mar it are like a tapestry of filth, woven together to tell a sick tale. Each stain a reminder of that which falls through the cracks of life. The discolorations line the carpet where once furniture stood like tape outlining the former place of a body at the scene of a homicide.

Message deleted.

Seventh unheard message sent December 22nd at 11:57pm:

The emptiness of the room yields an oddly soothing harmonic quality. Speak, and the walls gladly reply. Sing, and they are chorus. Scream, and they despair. Whisper, and they conspire. Oh, I used to speak to them. I'd tell them of the things that have transpired and of that which is yet to come, but they only mocked me. They grow closer with every silent moment. Let them crush me; I will not speak to them anymore. They never understood the important things like why the blood is boiling hot and whether pigs own planes. They never understood me...they never understood why the phone is red.

Message deleted.

Eighth unheard message sent December 23rd at 12:00am:

There's a faint smell of metal that tinges this stagnant air. It is a mixture of the metal that one would use to cut open their veins and the metal which spills from them, but that is not all. There is also the putrid stench of bile, like a bouquet of half-digested slop fell from punctured viscera and graced the air with its vile fragrance. To complement this perverse perfume, the phone is red. The air is choking, or perhaps I have just lost my stomach for speaking as it is becoming more difficult. Not that you're listening.

Message deleted.

Ninth unheard message sent December 23rd at 12:09am:

The floor feels like a knife with a jagged edge. It feels gentle to lie upon, but when I try to get up I just feel a sudden ripping and grating. The bed is far more comfortable, as gentle as clouds in a heaven that I'll never know. The walls are hard and unforgiving like a body will be when rigor mortis sets in and all the

red in the veins turns to blue-black, but the phone is still red for now. The room is cold, so very cold, like the last fires of hell were finally snuffed out and all that is left is the blowing chill of loneliness and desolation.

Message deleted.

Tenth unheard message sent December 23rd at 12:23am:

You don't understand. I know you don't. I can hear it in the silence. Do you know what silence is? Do you? I'll tell you. Silence is a thousand screams waiting to be born. And you, you are an abortion of sound. But it doesn't matter, none of that matters, because you aren't listening anymore. You're just like the walls, but worse, at least they talk back. You can't hear me, but you never did. And even if you could, you wouldn't understand.

Message deleted.

Eleventh unheard message sent December 23rd at 12:25am:

Why don't you just pick up and say something. Anything! Please. The phone is red. And what I am trying to tell you is... do you remember August 6th, two years ago? It was around six that night, you were wearing a white sun dress, you smelled of vanilla, and you came home with a phone you had bought for me. This phone. But then it was the purest of white, like your favorite flower, a lily.

Message deleted.

Twelfth unheard message sent December 23rd at 12:29am:

Now the phone is red like the phone used to call in Little Boy and Fat Man, but this time the bomb that fell on the other line was far worse than what Hiroshima and Nagasaki got. Tens of thousands died by that red phone, but this one ended an entire world. And you were my Enola Gay when you uttered the last reply this phone has ever received. "I don't love you anymore." And now the phone once of the purest white, is a sticky red. This red, once pulsing and alive, grows still; it will turn black like the darkness of a void.

Thirteenth unheard message sent December 23rd at 1:48am:

Funny how a dial tone sounds like a flat line...isn't it?









Stop.

There's a boy on the boat too. They're in the middle of the Atlantic. He would remind most of Charlie Bucket, not as optimistic though. He's wearing a yellow raincoat paired with stale rain boots. But about that yellow, yellow is the color of optimists you know, a happy color. A color that makes you think of sunshine, that reminds you that there is something to smile about when times have faded out into an all too cliché blue. But this boy, contrary to his demeanor, constantly fears the worst; he can smell disappointment. He knows the stench better than that of the New York sewers he's roamed through in his short but tragic life. He's not an orphan, but he's alone because he chooses to be. He's exceptionally intuitive for his age. He knows that if he stays alone he won't suffer the hurt that everyone else does. He knows he won't feel the beaten down, battered dog feeling or the disappointments of life, and so he appreciates solitude. He's 10.

Resume.

The mutiny on the ship has lasted for the past 30 days. The men have been back and forth between the Atlantic and Indian for the past 19 months. The captain has no sense of direction. He thinks he does, but he really doesn't. He steers the vessel in circles, hoping the current will take him home. There's no rum. No whiskey. No more maggot filled biscuits and no one can remember how to distill the sea water into something decent to drink. There was never any treasure to be found, just a ragged old man chasing a lifelong dream. They didn't know that though. This isn't another one of Conrad's stories of colonialism and darkness, but rather one of freedom and light. Light that cannot be seen. Light that instead has to be turned on from within and that can only be triggered by something as eventful as what's going to happen today.

Look.

The boy is running now. He's running towards the mainmast. He's running for his life from the hatch he's been hiding in for over two months. Why is he running? What's been hiding with him for 60 some odd days that he hadn't noticed before? He's been pissing in bottles and crapping in old whiskey barrels. Have his own bodily releases come to haunt him? Did he pee in the wrong barrel and come across some hidden sea monster? He is ten after all, sea monsters are most certainly real. Especially the kind that feed off of a 10 year old boy's defecation and piss for months on end. Those are the worst kind really, the kind that eat what you've shat. They're the ones that eventually turn into you. They become all of the things you try not to be. In his case, the sea monster would be a happy little boy running through

a field of poppies with friends. Laughing, joking, playing. Doing the things all little 10 year old boys should be doing. But not our little boy. Our little boy is running towards the center of a ship in the middle of a mutiny in a bright yellow raincoat from a sea monster that doesn't even exist.

Play.

Gunshots are being fired now. The captain, much like our little 10 year old boy, is alone. Fighting for nothing as you probably think by now. He's alone with half a barrel of wet gunpowder, a broken musket, and 2 bullets against an army of hungry, unwillingly sober and dehydrated sailors who were drafted under false pretenses. They are all armed and ready. Two have even brought the cannons up from the bottom of the boat. Sober sailors are more resourceful than you thought, huh? These two are the youngest of the group, half a generation older than our little boy in the bright yellow raincoat. They haven't thought their plan through. They think the cannons will be the most effective, because they have the biggest bang. They think they'll make the captain piss himself and listen to their demands. Oh yeah, they'll show him alright. They'll show him real good.

Wait.

Our captain is trying to plan his next move as quickly as possible. This isn't chess for Christ's sake; this is life or death. He knows he won't come out of this one alive, but he's going down like those Japs did 15 years ago. He's going to die doing what he loves most. Fighting that is, sailing would be too obvious an answer. Our captain is a World War II vet, and he's proud of it. He lost his way once in South Germany as Hitler's armies were gaining on his unit, but he dressed as a woman, fed the boorish beasts when they invaded and saluted a hearty "Heil Hitler!" as they left. Treacherous isn't it? No, it was ingenious. The bravest thing a man could have done. But our captain knew that today wouldn't be as honorable.

Resume.

The young sailors have finished loading the cannons. They begin to clear out their lively counterparts and light them one by one. The blasts are breathtaking. The most amazing fires one could start in the middle of the ocean. The night skies are lit by the reds, oranges, and golds. Our little boy quickly realizes that being alone isn't the path he should have taken. His short life flashes before his eyes, and he remembers 8 Christmases, his first day of school, orange cream sodas, and all the time wasted roaming the sewers of the East Coast. He knows he'll never see another Christmas.

Quick! Pause! No! Play! Wait! STOP!

Does he really have to die? Can't he jump off the boat or float to land with

a few cuts and bruises? Can't he go and start the life he should've been living since the day he was born? No, death is natural you know. Death is something we all must face at one point and time. Without it there wouldn't be birth. There wouldn't be a need for yellow to remind us that we need to smile when things are blue, because things would never be blue without it.

Listen.

There was a little girl he studied arithmetic with every Tuesday after dinner. Her name was Megan. He was gonna marry her one day. He remembers her in black and white except for her golden hair and sad grey eyes. Suddenly he smiles. But why is he smiling? Our little boy doesn't want to be happy. He wants to be alone doesn't he? Doesn't he know he's going to die in the middle of the ocean without ever really living? He opens his mouth and lets out a butterfly. Then another. And another. He lets out four thousand beautiful butterflies one after the other. The light inside has turned on and now our little boy has been freed from the darkness. He understands now that he didn't want to be alone, but he wanted to be loved. But it's too late. He's been blown into exactly three hundred and sixty eight pieces in the middle of the Atlantic by two sober idiots with cannons thinking the big bang would simply scare the captain, not kill them all.

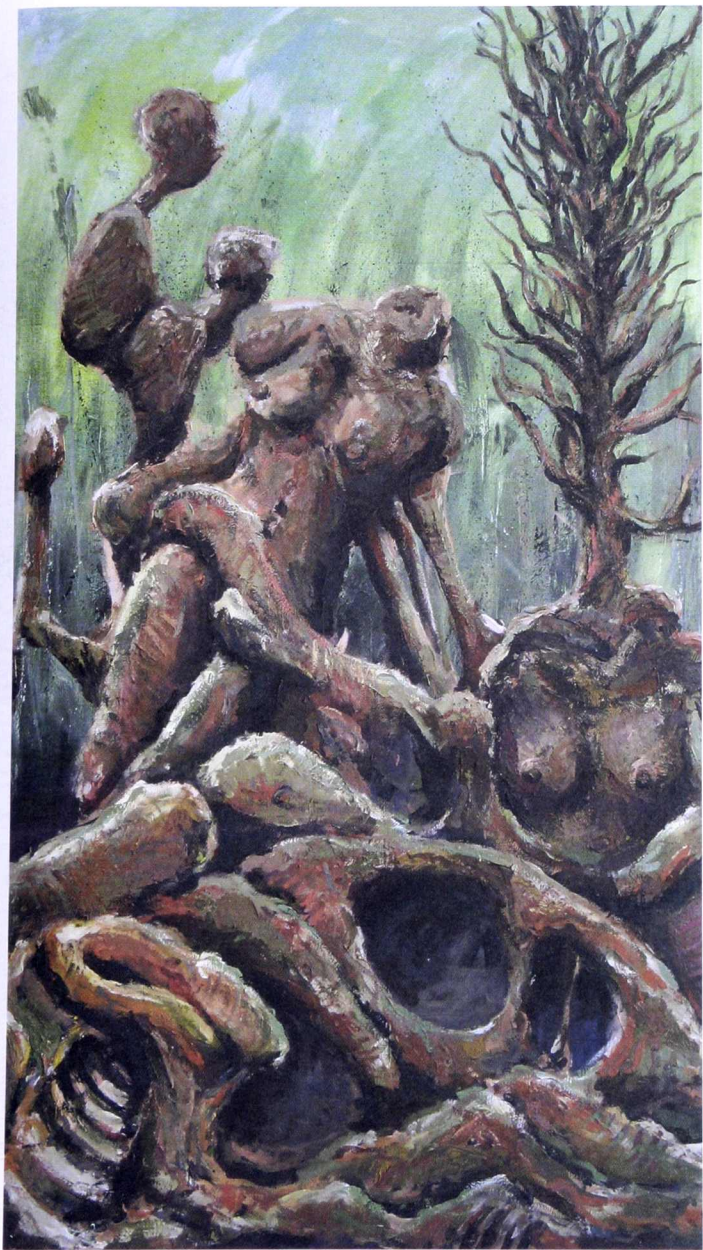


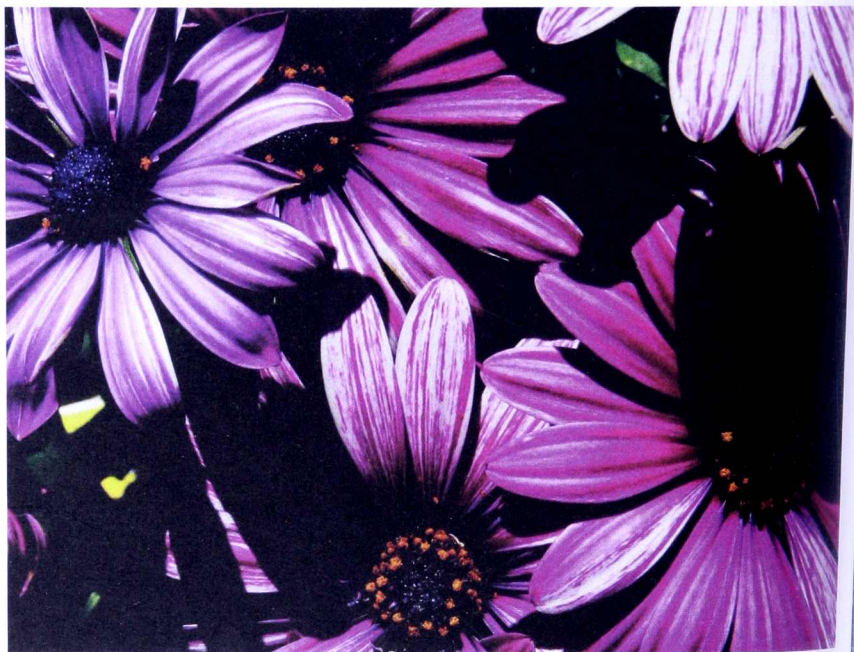
With Light Comes Darkness

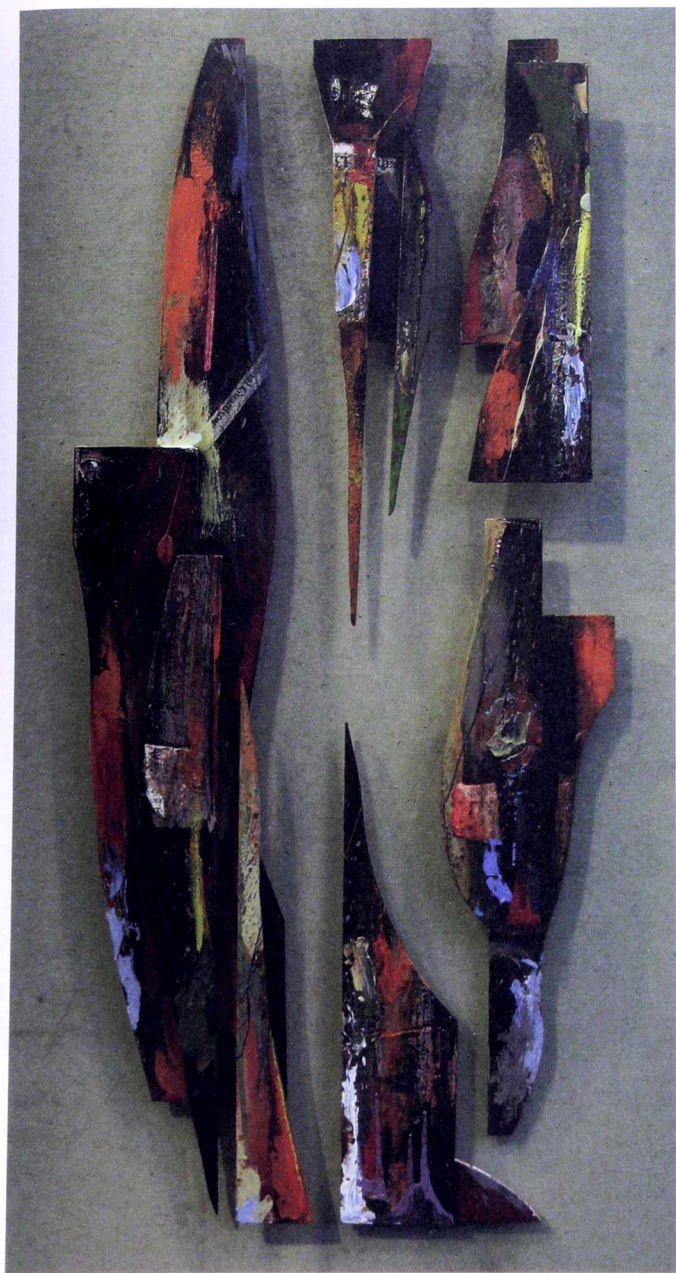


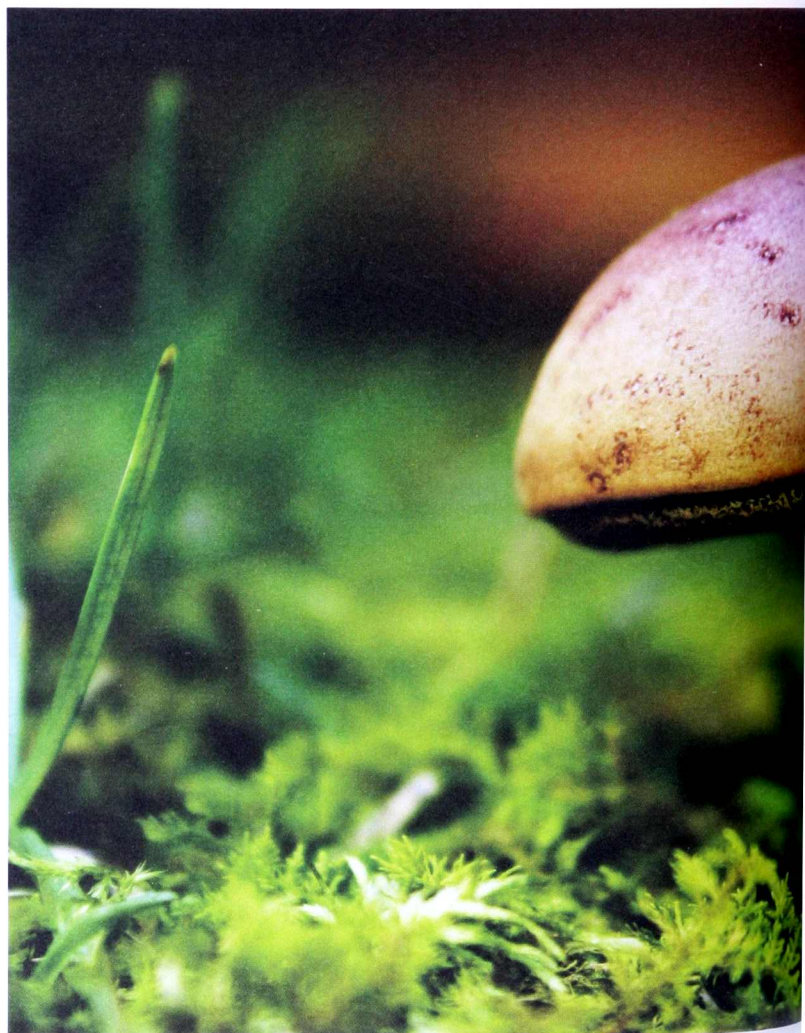














It hit me like the Staten Island Express Bus.

My gift might be motivated by something more than friendship. Crossing Seventh Avenue with the framed Buckingham Nicks album perfectly gift-wrapped under my arm, I knew full well that it would be the most thoughtful and appropriate present Mikey would receive this year. His 30th birthday would be indelibly marked with thoughts of me. My subconscious was a sneaky fucker.

I liked his new boy, Ryan. He was nice, but more importantly he wasn't as good looking or as well-off as I. This was petty, sure, but it felt good to win my own self-comparisons. And there was no way in hell that he would have as specific and rare a gift as mine.

Reality check: this was Mikey's birthday, this was *his* night, not my opportunity to sashay in and create bar theater. I paused to collect myself on the corner, took a few breaths, and launched into the monologue I had written in the first months after our breakup.

There are reasons-- *good* reasons-- why we are not together anymore. And his success is more important to him than my success, than our relationship. And he is not a bad person, just an unsuitable candidate for the long haul. And being with Mikey means playing a supporting role in "The Mikey Show." The inevitable coda:

And he screwed more guys when we were together than I have in my entire life.

Okay, that brought me back a little.

But my heart still ached. Badly.

I got lost in the window of the Urban Outfitters, fixated on the bottle-opener necklace on the mannequin. God, that period of my life-- Mikey and I were separated, and I clung desperately to the last vestiges of twinkdom: knee-high tube socks, wife beaters, and that goddamned bottle-opener necklace, declaring my obvious devotion to the bar scene. Sometimes... sometimes it amazed me that he took as long as he did to leave me. He had barely scratched the surface of his ambitions and I had already resigned to complacency. He would be the toast of the art world, and I would be stuck here, forever haunting Chelsea with memories of what I should have been.

This was precisely the loop that my therapist, the unfortunately named Mr.

Block, had warned me against. I was too sensitive, placing grave importance on the opinions of others to the point of obsession. And with profound rejection, the what-ifs could be crippling. When my relationship with Mikey dissolved, so did I. My mother came to New York and dragged me home herself, nursing my heart to relative health before sending me back north.

Mikey and I had several missteps and misunderstandings along the path to civility. On more than one occasion, when meeting for a few friendly cocktails, one of us would make a move on the other and invariably be shot down. Then there was my birthday party, where he assumed I was over the whole thing and brought a boy with him. I was not amused, and it did not end well. After each awkward lurch forward, we would take a two-week (or so) breather, and try again, eventually getting to a place where we could be happy for each other.

But my heart still ached. Badly.

It was time to regroup. No one would notice if I was late, but I could not show up to the bar looking so disheveled. A few tears swiped away, and I was almost good to go. It really wasn't so bad. We were good friends now, with little jealousy or bitterness. When either managed to creep into play, we were good at acknowledging it and moving on.

Still if I pulled at just the right threads, I could unravel myself enough to see what was still happening inside.

Shit. I had dropped the album. The glass on the frame was broken and the wrapping paper torn. Perfectly appropriate. And the tears were unstoppable. I bent down to salvage what I could. Cursing and muttering under my breath, it didn't surprise me to see the young boy staring at me. I was the crazy man arguing with himself on the sidewalk. The boy held his mother's hand and cocked his head, staring intently. I gave him a half-smile and a little wave. His mother pulled him over and joined a crowd forming around the front of the express bus stopped partway into the intersection. Such a hush seemed quite out of place, as if something devastating or criminally beautiful happened. I followed the spooky boy's gaze as he turned from me to the horrible tableau and back again. I shuddered when I first noticed the brown Cole Haans, certainly a common enough shoe. Curiosity turned to quiet bewilderment as I realized that I knew what I was seeing here-- I would undoubtedly see it for the rest of my days. And quiet bewilderment gave way to gratitude as the kind man in the paramedic's uniform bent over, and with a tender, deliberate motion, closed my eyes.



You dance through lies like rain,
no drops ever touching you
and steam rising from your feet on the wet pavement.

Chilling drops hesitate the rhythm of my lungs.
They wash away
— wash out —
all of me and none of you.

Your colors still gleam —
putrid honey shimmering in the shadowy dew
of mists that fade
— as I fade,
left behind
waiting on the storms to pass.



Break, Break, Break,
On thy cold grey stones, O sea!

Meghan Stewart



I

His song was of the boy-made explosion sounds
that echoed through a plot of uncut grass.
The self he knew would play in warlike games
of sticks and fallen pine cones, unaware
that men would fight and die on lands that he
would only see in books from a father's shelf.
A child of eight, who crawled through towering weeds
beneath a porch built by a man's own hands,
would grow to build a porch of his own.

The sun above the head of boys threw long
shadows on asphalt boundaries. A mom,
with checkered apron, bellowed, "Dinner's ready,"
while ears would strain to hear like hungry dogs
and call an end to friendly fighting.

II

The song has changed to labored whistles of
a man who cuts his lawn in careful lines.
The orange and red of fallen leaves covers
the porch that his own father's father built
with hands that look much like his own do now.

He stops and watches neighbor boys with sticks
in hand. He knows the ambush that they plan
will swiftly come through jungle weeds and end
the battle boys, who play like soldiers, make.

A woman calls for dinner, taking him
from mowing rows back to an age in which
war means more than pine cones and porches.
He smiles in spite of himself and goes in
his house to kiss his wife and eat his meal.

Ghost Forest





Hail Mary, full of grace:

They are silver linked; like manacles attached to red beads,
a chain gang of prayers, 150 Hail Marys.

I finger the red in between my thumb and
forefinger. My middle is awkward and useless.
The harder I press, the more I discolor.
I squeeze them and they leak: a hint of
a flowery substance and ashen feet.

I roll them on the table, arms out, shaking,
for I feel nothing. These beads mean nothing.

I press them; almost shove them under my nose.
I sucker in the smell and a scowl forms on my lips
with the thought of a little Italian man stomping on
thousands of rosebuds to make one rosary.

And they anger me, mostly
because I don't like the color red and
because I feel guilty:

for not attending your funeral.
for being ashamed the last time I saw you.
for knowing you cleaned rich ladies houses for a living.

And I vowed that would not be me.
I will not scrub tile floors for a living!

But I do.

In order to live in my gated community with
my salt water pool and walking trail and fitness
center.

I help keep a sub shop clean for a greedy man
who pays his workers the least amount of money
legally possible.

So I am just like you.

And I wonder if you are proud of my outcome.
The fact I am the only one out of your twenty
grandkids to pursue a college degree.
Or are you happier for them? With their husbands
and their wives and their babies and they're starting a family?

And I am alone, behind a desk, pen and paper in hand,
my only companion a dog that shits and pisses on the floor.

Am I what you scrubbed those floors for?
Am I what you thought I'd be?

(In my despair)

I pull at the beads, the silver polished manacles,
the chain gang is free. I only have enough beads
left for 39 Hail Marys.

I am sorry your rosary is broken.
It had to be broken. . . broken just like me.

*Holy Mary, mother of God pray for us sinners now
and at the hour of our death.*

Amen.

When you suggested we ride our bikes outside
To enjoy the rare, crisp, perfect Sunday weather,
And to see nature's yellows, oranges, and greens,
I thought it sounded like a beautiful idea,
But it would be prettier to think about than to do.
So I stayed indoors while you went out
To face all of the bumps and hills and turns
That the trail along the river had to offer.

It feels more comfortable to stay inside
Where I can control my own incline and speed.
And track my steady pace and caloric burn,
Monitoring my own heart-rate. This time, I flicked
Pesky perspiration from my eyes,
And thought of your wanton hair wisping the wind,
Of each salty-sweet aqueous drop of hydration,
Making rivers and trails on your brow,
Reflecting Fall's fallen glories on your nose and chin,
Kissed by the breeze you make for yourself.

And I decided that your sweat means more than mine
Because it becomes the children of your adventure
And you love each saline drop of release.
Meanwhile, the liquid steam smothers me
Like thick tears until they fall
On the miles of monotonous track,
Disappearing on the same street
That I've been on for hours.





"Father, father, where are you going?
O do not walk so fast.
Speak, father, speak to your little boy,
Or else I shall be lost.

The night was dark, no father was there;
The child was wet with dew;
The mire was deep, and the child did weep,
And away the vapour flew."

- William Blake, from *Songs of Innocence*

When I wake up sick after a big night out the wind doesn't blow Irish ballads through my open bedroom window, and women never weep over my words from the night before. I wake up in stages, spreading myself out across the bed with a big head. I'll force myself up and shamble to the near bathroom to hold my head under the running faucet, then take the long trek through the living room into the kitchen for a huge glass of ice water. I return to my room, sleep until late afternoon.

My habits come from my examples. There was a time when I committed myself to the hard East Texan wisdom of the Great White Mike. That was Mike's gang appellation from his days of cooking and running methamphetamine along the pine-lined corridors of the Texarkana border country. Mike was entering law school. I was sleeping mostly on his neighbor's couch. I remember asking Mike, "How do ya manage to drink all night and still make class in the morning?"

"Man up," he'd say with a laugh, "and face yer responsibilities."

He'd follow with historic examples of burdened and beloved drunks, Roosevelt and Churchill being his favorites, inevitably moving on to a series of pointed rhetorical questions about my family and so forth, quitting the subject when it came his turn to toke the blunt. Mike had a father, but the only thing ever given him was a rusted out '54 Ford F-100 that fumed thick black smoke and barely ran at all. Envy manifested itself in Mike's big brother attitude and constant appeals for me to imitate my father in everything.

But Mike's influence has waned over the years. I find myself drifting back toward the habits of luses,¹ pretty young women with wealthy daddies and older gentlemen benefactors about whom I had no courage to inquire – I find myself reclining again on that Italian leather couch and keeping up with the

¹ Lush, n. a habitual heavy drinker. Dipsomaniacs, alkies, rummies, a souse; man, there's a million names for hopeless boozehounds.

appetites of those who can afford to slack and loaf and lean.² Indolence has not served me well. When my lifestyle is challenged I deflect my critics by making a joke of the accusation. Or I try.

Early in her pregnancy, maybe month two, Mary asked me to stop driving drunk. It was four a.m. and I had just arrived at her house. We were sitting up in bed watching late night television, me smoking pot and sipping a beer for a nightcap, when she asked.

“Eventually you’ll get caught. And then what?”

“But I hate wasted talent,” I replied.

“Why did I invite you to my sixteenth birthday party?”

Summertime and all of this Friday night ahead, 10pm, High Life in hand, car on cruise control. Taking this well-worn course past my regular liquor store and those all-night gas stations upon which I rely, I’m soon at Gilson’s hauling a thirty pack up the short brick steps of a post war family home, hammering on the aluminum door while watching through the melt-glass figures eddy in the sallow light.

Gilson greets me at the door with a hand shake. We go to the kitchen; I smile and nod at every hello. Familiar faces at this house, my usual retreat when I’ve nothing better to do and not enough money for the bars. And tonight a great night, better than going out or even to my favorite little hole in the wall beer bar. Tonight, his live-in girlfriend out of town, Gilson promises a party.

Cracking a beer I slide the can into my koozie, take a long foamy first swill, and join the crowd in the living room where Aaron catches me to bum a cigarette.

“How was work?”

“I’m, uh, recently unemployed.” And then there’s that story, the way I’m willing to tell it to a seventeen year old boy with big dreams of baseball glory. Judah slinks over in the middle of my boastful reinvention all smiles for a smoke, “You didn’t bring Hannah? Movin’ a little fast, aren’t ya?”

But Judah knows. He knows every detail, even the ones I will not include here. Every detail I would not relate to another living soul, the details I’ll not disclose to God, even in a moment of weakness. Judah was my wing man on that trip, watched me work on girls in Panama City Beach all weekend while he nursed beers and thought about his girlfriend back home who’d made us blueberry pancakes for lunch before we left. We stumbled into the store

² Remember, dear reader, remember your Whitman. What thoughts I have of him tonight and most nights, dreading his enumerations.

together late Sunday night with sand still in our shoes, and he stood next to me while I was told I'd been fired. He knows that Hannah was too young and too smart to stick around.

Aaron has just noticed my koozie, neon green MidTown OB/GYN, and I explain with a smile that I like to rep the businesses I frequent. He gets a laugh; I regret not grabbing the Alabama koozie instead. Pained for distraction, I check my phone. There's a text from Eric Turner about new books to read. I step outside to call.

"Dammit, Turner, it's Saturday night."

"Have you started on that McCarthy?"

"If I come over, it's to get you out of that house."

And then Turner starts in with his usual but oh I've been drinking for days and really need a break, some nonsense about work in the morning, an angry girlfriend, and all manner of esoteric excuses.

"Should I bring you a box of tampons, Eric?"

"Give me five minutes to change the one I've got in, then you can come pick me up."

Turner is rearranging his bookcase as I walk into the living room. Already I'm feeling light, laughing, immediately hollering at him to hurry up. "Yeah, No Country, it's good. Let's go."

"Haley is gonna be pissed," he says, slowly shaking his head.

"You really like this one?"

"Ready to get married and have babies."

Turner grabs a stack of books off the coffee table and begins to sort them into the bookcase. "You read any e. e. cummings?"

"by golly, by jingo' – jingo! That's smart stuff."

He hands me a collection of poetry to take home. "You must be an autodidact."

"And you're an auto-slow-ass. Les go."

"That was a compliment."

"At the top of the mountain we're all snow leopards."

"Kerouac?"

"Thompson. You didn't like Desolation Angels?"

"It's fragmented, boring."

Text message from: Sarah D.

Well he isn't a girl tom. You can't be afraid for him the rest of your life or else you'll be a nervous wreck.

I think parents have no choice. We have to worry. It's biology. I'm convinced

a parent's worry is an evolutionary trait. It is this intense worry that causes a parent to focus so singly and completely on their child, to meditate so deeply in each moment that every nuance in a child's cry is revealed as a comprehensible language. If he's hungry, needs a change, has gas, a parent can know just by listening. My mom can tell if her shi-tzu wants water or needs to go out just by the dog's bark.

Thank God he isn't a girl. Sarah was right about that. Not that his sex made any difference on his birthday. Those days are too fast, too confusing, and just too damn new for future worries to be anything more than vague, fleeting premonitions. You are securely bound to the present moment, to the immediate concerns of counting fingers and toes, of nervously asking the nurses if the various measurements and metrics are normal and healthy. It is a strange day when your son is born.

I'm told that many fathers faint at the sight of their child emerging, drawing in that first breath and hearing its first naked sounds, all under a dazzling array of blurry lights. The poor child being handled by masked figures surrounded by machinery blinking red, beeping in time. The newborn wailing all the while. "Must hurt the kid as much as the mother," was my first coherent thought as I watched in fear and ineffable joy.

Both grandmothers had slipped cameras into my pockets. I used one of these to snap the first image of my son free of the womb. It looks like a modern interpretation of those old Dutch 'Anatomy Lesson' paintings, only the leading physician with arms outstretched in the air displaying a bloody newborn.

That same doctor still masked but now benevolent, I recognize her as the gynecologist. She lets me cut the umbilical chord — and then hold, for the first time, my son. Cautiously, I step toward Mary. She is pale, hair pasted to her face with hot sweat. I bend down bringing the boy's head to her face. A mother's love drop rolls down her cheek as she kisses him.

Do you recall St. Francis in midwinter calling out to an almond tree, "Speak to me of God!" and the almond tree breaks into bloom?³

Back at Gilson's and the party is picking up, the familiar crowd swollen now with

³ In the forward to Thich Nhat Hahn's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Brother David Steindl-Rast writes, "I felt a bit like the almond tree confronted by St. Francis. 'Start blooming, frozen Christian!' the mystic Angelus Silesius called out. 'Springtime is at hand. When will you ever bloom if not here and now?'" Thich Nhat Hahn's words entered me like a Zen koan: Speak to me of the unspeakable, and not with words. "Speak to me of God!" This is the challenge Thich Nhat Hahn offers us: Come alive, truly alive!"

strange faces. Eric Turner embeds himself into some religious conversation. I go to the music room following the sound of guitars being tuned. A blunt makes the rounds, a small crowd assembles in the doorway to see, and soon I'm lost trying to lead the guys through some old tunes, occasionally sending an onlooker to the kitchen for more beer. It isn't long before someone gives up, "I'm too fucked up for this, man!" so I return again to the kitchen.

Good old Mitch with his bottle of whiskey, posted up at the counter, shot glasses orbiting the big bottle like so many moons. Mitch leans casually against the counter, watching the chaos and disorder of people shouting over a drinking game and old acquaintances meeting each other again by yells from a room away. Some girl is prostrate on the floor, a victim of the still lively drinking game. I step over her on my way to the fridge for another beer.

"That's a big bottle of whiskey to finish on your own."

"Let me put it this way," Mitch explains. "If I drink this whole bottle, I'll die. But I can't take it home with me and risk an open container charge on the way."

Clearly, Mitch needed a friend. I tell him as much and he agrees, so we proceed to take many consecutive shots of Thompson whiskey. Any time liquor comes in a plastic container you can be certain of its quality. And anytime Mitch shows up at Gilson's you can bet he has with him a fresh bottle of Thompson. I've always liked Mitch. Mid forties, generous with his drink, good to his daughter. I think she's eight.

Sitting alone in bed my mind drifts. Inexorably to subjects on which there is no reason to dwell. Why did I break up with so and so years ago when I shoulda married her and spent the rest of my life in luxury sipping Long Islands watching ships scud across the horizon ... and she really was a sweet girl, too.⁴ But these hallucinations quickly jolt me to the present, or the near present, when life was just as complicated as it is today but seemed infinitely simpler. Life is always simple when you ignore the complications, take an overly optimistic approach, and assume that life'll all work out no matter. But no matter how overwhelming things become, having a sweet girl to go home with always helps. They act as an anchor, harboring the immediate future in Comfort

⁴ Sweet and rich. To this day I can't understand why she was willing to marry me. I mean rich as in having multiple mansions, one of which was a Frank Lloyd Wright home. Original Warhols and Dali sketches. Mint, garage kept Delorians. Private island off the coast of Florida. One year we missed Eric Clapton's concert in Little Rock, so we took the private jet across the Rockies to San Jose, California, where we stayed in fabulous hotel suites and ordered everything on the room service menu every night.

and Acceptance.

...this new girl buys me dinner.

Michael was born on a Thursday; Becky and I had our first date that Friday. After a quick stop at my house for a shower and a change of clothes, I asked Becky to meet me at a nearby Friday's. We sat at the bar, smoked cigarettes, drank a beer. We swapped first impressions of parenthood. She told me about her kids, anecdotes embedded with advice. I devoured my steak before she could finish half of her Captain Morgan's grilled chicken plate. She suggested I take her leftovers to Mary who must by now be tired of hospital food.

I smile back at the nurses on my way down the hall to Mary's room, to-go box in hand.

"You probably had a hot date while you were gone. I'm probably eating some bitch's leftovers."

"I woulda got you Mexican, but I didn't get your text until I was walking in," which is true.

"Thanks for the food," she says, smiling.

Michael, previously sleeping angelically in his bassinette, began to cry. I carefully unwrap his blankets, quietly singing an old Drifters' tune. His diaper changed, the babe rebundled, I settle in to the big reclining chair with him cradled in one arm, a copy of *Lonesome Traveler* in my free hand, and read aloud until he sleeps again.

With the whiskey roiling my stomach, I make an unsteady pirouette to face the fridge for another beer to help soothe the churning in my gut. Some Kid is pulling a High Life from my thirty pack as he and Turner talk Star Wars.

"Hey bro, did ya also bring some High Life?"

"Oh shit, man, I'm sorry. Are these yours?" he asks, obsequious and sincere.

"Keep it. Help yourself to 'em."

Turner pulls me in to some trivial technical debate about light sabers or storms troopers or who cares what.⁵ "You punks, just watch the Kurosawa; go straight to the source."

"Right on," Turner says, "that's where Lucas got the idea."

Together we explain the origin of the now famous trilogy. Essentially, Lucas is stoned out his mind watching Kurosawa's classic *The Hidden Fortress* and

⁵ If you can accept brilliant, noisy explosions in space, you ought to be able to take for granted that light sabers can function on planets with Earth-like atmospheres or on space-traversing vessels capable of simulating such atmospheres. Kubrick knew what he was doing.

thinks, "What if they were robots?" and that little seed germinates into a wild industrial venture of miniatures and millions. The Kid seems to understand.

"I bet this guy has a healthy dose of the Good Doctor in him," observes the Kid, beaming, tapping Turner on the shoulder with the back of his hand. Turner, waving a beer around, disagrees, "nah, Tom's too much of a theist to be like Thompson."

"Thompson was a Nietzschean Christian," I interrupt. "He warned God: take care of me, or you'll have me on your hands."

Mitch joins in, "you'd have to believe in god to threaten him."

"Every body believes in God, bro. Foxholes."

But Mitch has never been in a foxhole. He asserts himself to be an atheist. Turner makes the same claim. So does the Kid. As if any of that matters. And it doesn't.

"Doesn't matter. Jesus was a Buddhist," and with that I grab two fresh beers from the fridge before heading for the living room, shrugging my way past those chortling three who are content to agree with themselves.

Allen Ginsberg once called Jack Kerouac "the new Buddha of American prose." Kerouac, the legendary Beat writer who mythologized his life across fourteen novels and a book of essays,⁶ remains a popular writer. Ginsberg thought his friend to be revitalizing the American written word, much like the Buddha revolutionized religion across the Indian subcontinent and Asia.

Master of four great palaces, Siddhartha Gautama had access to every desire and indulgence available to the people of his time. He was married to a beautiful wife, Yasodhara, who gave him a son, Rahula. But the Buddha left all of this, including the inheritance of his father's powerful kingdom. He left home to free the world from suffering. Yasodhara, known for going among the people to feed the poor and heal the sick, gave the Buddha her blessing when he left. The boy Rahula would later join his father's Sangha, becoming one of the more prominent monks of the community.

When my son was a week old Mary called to inform me of her mother's most recent concern. "My mom thinks his penis is swollen."

Perhaps I should have ignored the call, but I think there's a moral imperative

mesome Traveller, the book of essays, is atypical of the Duluoz Legend because it is not a novel but a collection of largely unrelated sketches covering Kerouac's traveling and time atop Desolation Peak, a lonely mountain. That same mountain top hermitage is the setting of the first half of *Desolation*, and except for the leaving of little benevolent treats for the wildlife at night you'd think from it that Jack was writing about two different retreats. Mythology works that way.

to answer the calls of my son's mother; worst case scenarios are never far from the mind of a new and utterly unselfconfident parent, and anytime my cell phone lights up with her name my heart flutters. Every terrible possibility rushes through my mind in a single shock of doom and horror. On this morning I was in the early stages of recovery, at that giddy narrow of time when you're still tipsy from the previous night, not yet suffering and woebegone.

Michael was scheduled for a pediatrician visit the very next morning. Even if there had been a problem, there was nothing to do but wait for the doctor's opinion. I suggested calmly and rationally, "Well, dear, tell your mother that the boy takes after his father, and that she has no cause for concern." It was during the ensuing tongue-lashing that my head began to shudder rhythmically, and my mouth became as parched as the Taklamakan Desert in summer. Erstwhile best big brother friend David, Mary's oldest brother, would later explain my error as I'm driving him the two hours north to pick up a car .

"Humor makes them think you don't care. You have to console them."

"But you get the joke."

"She needs reassurance."

Maybe I should have brought three beers with me to the living room. Back in the kitchen for another beer there's Turner and Mitch standing together in the dim light of the laundry room doorway, hidden from the party unless you stand at the fridge door. Turner is shaking his head, speaking frantically, clasped hands outstretched to plea. Mitch has the sharp edge of a steak knife pressed against his own forehead.

"This looks exciting." "

Tom, explain to him why cutting open his forehead is a bad idea."

I shrug, opening another beer. "It's his forehead, Eric," I draw a filet knife from the block on the counter, "Mitch, this one's sharper."

Mitch trades me blades, eyes glazed, expressionless. The sort of look a man has when he's dared to do something unimaginable. The look you give when others are in disbelief and you're deadly serious about what you're going to do.

"Tom, what the fuck man?" Turner asks, incredulous.

"I think it's time for you to change your tampon, Eric."

Under his breath Turner mutters something about Jesus as Mitch drags the knife across his forehead. A shallow slice, but deep enough to draw a bold red streak above his brow.

Kerouac had one child. When Jack's wife told him that she was pregnant, Jack insisted she have an abortion. What followed for Jack was a divorce and then

nine years of travel. The Dharma Bum lifestyle he glamorized and dramatized across so many pages, all while denying that he had a daughter at all — until a court ordered him to pay child support.

I was certain that Kerouac had left his wife, but having reviewed documentaries and interviews, reread everything I could find, the sources conflict. I was certain because I have a distinct impression and vague memory. There is a voice, not like a documentary narrator but like a friend being interviewed, which says, “Jack left her a note. It read something like, ‘Get an abortion’ signed, ‘Jack’. And then he left town.” One fast move and he was gone, if that memory is real. But it is often difficult to distinguish memories from dreams.

Early fall and I’m sick. A nasty cough keeps me across the room away from my boy. All I can do is sit next to Mary on the couch and watch my parents play with the boy, not yet ten pounds, just under a month old. Memories of Quiet Water beach, that feeling of standing so tall on my father’s shoulders before leaping into the calm waters come rushing to me as I watch my father hold Michael above his face and croon off key, “...up on da-ah roo-oof.”

Mary won’t look at me. I reach out and touch with the tip of my finger the new tattoo on the inside of her wrist, three interlocking ovals over a circle. “You stole my idea,” I say, hoping she will notice the slight, friendly smile.

“Only ‘cause you’re too much of a bitch to get it done yourself,” she snaps back, quietly, not even turning her head to look at me.

These moments with my son are rarer than I’d like to admit. Occasionally she will let me stop by her house for a few hours, read to him from some book I have handy, and then nap with him blissfully asleep on my chest. But I was sick, and unwilling to risk passing on to him whatever disease had crept up on me. At least my parents were able to spend some time with him. She still likes my parents.

I leave Turner to handle Mitch’s mess of a forehead, extracting myself from the scene and therefore from responsibility. I escape to the front porch, following Judah and a small crowd of others seeking refuge from the turbid smog of tobacco and marijuana indoors.

On my way out of the kitchen, stepping again over the passed out girl, I notice that she has vomited. The room reeks of cherry rum. I close the aluminum door behind me and join the crowd outside. Everyone inside seems raving drunk, but out here the breeze soothes our booze soaked brains.

James as always is pitching me some new project, “you’re the best drummer I know, man.”

"You must not know many drummers."

Judah, backed up into a corner out of the wind, is having no luck with Hannah, but still emboldened because all night I've avoided her and she has avoided me. He asks me, "So hey man, how's the baby thing goin'?"

"Good, great," and I cut a slight, friendly smile at Hannah and nod, "Still practicing on that bass?"

She blushes, smiles, "Some times. I've just been busy with work."

Turner emerges from the house dragging a gust of choking mist behind him. I wait through some small talk in silence, ignoring James's speculation about god and aliens, before venturing back indoors for a beer piss. Mitch has left handprints in blood on the hanging mirror. I check the now dark and desolate band room where I find Mitch passed out on the couch, forehead beginning to scab over.

Gilson soon follows me outside to say, "Time to go home." After a few obligatory protests and Gilson's polite apology for ending the party, people begin to find their cars and drive off. Turner looks at me. I nod for him to follow me inside where a few assorted guests still loiter or search for lost phones. Judah and James follow. Gilson is trying to coax the girl on the kitchen floor to communicate.

"So what's the deal?"

"It's a mess, man."

"Steph is gonna be pissed," I say laughing, groping for beer, but none are left. Judah has joined me and is almost as disappointed as I am to discover our dearth of booze. Turner, by now drunk enough to commiserate with our disappointment, offers to carry on the drinking at his house, "We just gotta keep it down."

Judah and James follow us. We stop at the nearest 24/7 store, now nearly 4am, for more beer, then round the corner to Eric's house. Inside, James is pitching projects, now involving Turner in some great musical scheme.

"And Tom on drums, Judah on bass, it'll be great."

Judah, who has been staring off at nothing now for minutes, returns, "Tom has no time for a band. Just a job and baby."

James, ever genial, asks, "How is all that?"

"It's great, man. Good. Due late September."

Judah, his mind rooted, continues, "What does Hannah think of you being a daddy?"

James notices the bookshelf, "Favorite writer?"

Turner likes Vonnegut and McCarthy, and I'm undecided between Thompson and Kerouac.

"Kerouac was a cocksucker," Turner asserts, and our longstanding debate is revived, Judah and James now spectators.

"That's pure speculation."

"Then why'd he always talk about Dean's dick?"

"Gore Vidal, Oscar Wilde."

"But they weren't assholes." "

Kerouac was an asshole, but he was a great writer, too."

Judah takes this chance to reinsert himself into the conversation, "Is that your plan, Tom, be a great writer?"

"Did Kerouac have kids?" Turner asks, sincere.

"He had one daughter."

And so the rest of the evening goes, the talk evolving into yelling as the beer supply dwindles. Turner finally admits that Kerouac was a good writer, and then I explain why Kerouac was in fact an asshole. Judah does not again take up the subject of my imminent fatherhood. Some time around seven that morning one of Eric's roommates emerges from his room to compel us out of the house. I drive to Mary's.

I am glad that I took so many pictures of Michael with my phone. My favorite photo of him is on that phone. He's only two days old and just looking at the picture recalls that newborn smell. I worry I will forget that smell. Half of his face is obscured by shadow. Maybe he's too young and fresh to smile with the big grin you and I smile with, but it sure looks like a smile to me. Looks like a real smile. There's no teeth.

I don't know anything about kids. I'm slow and clumsy changing a diaper. I caught his first smile on camera that night in the hospital. Now he smiles constantly. Only cries when he's hungry, or gassy, or needs a change. If you rest my son prone on your chest as you lean back in a reclining chair or on the couch, put his little feet in your hands and pull up, gently bending his knees. Not yet two months, but already he'll push up with his legs, scooting himself closer to your face, startling blue eyes staring directly into yours.



I wonder, is it coincidence
That enemy
And memory
Sound so alike?
Or trend
And friend,
How similar they sound.
And loathe,
And Love,
And now that I think, there's
Also coincidence
And consequence.

I'm drunk off these sleepless nights,
These clouds of pillows
 secret wishes and fears.
The blurred vision of the heights I feel in this state –
Insomnia would be a dream.
Somnambulance is better like it.
I've toasted the dinners and stars
 to the death of morning to come.
I've tasted the metallic sheets of gray dawn.
Damn. Another dusk gone.
I never joined in the atmosphere, the night revelry,
Cloistered in my own head, awake, alone.
We share the solidarity of the mourning.
We don't sleep. We don't speak.
We drink it all in.
 We drink, we think...
We are the night.
We are the reason the dark exists.
These sleepless nights change seasons,
 change hands,
 change minds.
But I'm drunk again, and digress.

Lottie Anne Weaver is a good, old, southern woman. She grew up on a country farm in Georgia. As a child, her feet knew the feel of red clay dirt and long blades of grass but not of the soles of shoes. Her hands plucked the feathers from chickens when it came time for supper. Her face knew the feel of humid, hot Georgia heat and the cool breeze of evening while drinking sweet tea on the front porch with her mama. As a teenager, her feet grew accustomed to high heels and stockings. Her hands first felt the warmth of another. Her cheeks knew the tingling left from a kiss and felt wet streaks of salty tears from heartbreak. As a woman, she walked down the aisle to a Mr. Harold Weaver, a soldier. She enjoyed the feel of him beside her as they slept in bed, learning what it meant to love truly. She knew the joy of having children. She learned the pain of loss.

Having led a full life of 82 years, until two weeks ago Lottie felt that nothing could break her.

Gardening was a favorite pastime of Lottie's. It calmed her and kept her strong as her body aged. Every morning, Lottie watered, planted, and replanted flowers. It brought her joy to place fresh roses on her little wooden table. Seeing the dirt under fingernails made her feel as if the day wasn't wasted. It was her visual accomplishment. Two weeks ago, however, Lottie found many of her flowers dug up, uprooted, and scattered sadly about the round stone steps that led a path through the garden.

Lottie's world may as well have been uprooted too. To think, her peaceful sanctuary invaded! The tall pine trees that bordered the little garden and her home no longer served as an impenetrable fortress.

The first morning she found her precious garden disturbed, she went to speak to Harold.

"I just don't know what to do, Harold! My flowers were all over! My poor garden," Lottie said, as tears began pool in her eyes. In her right hand, a dead rose.

Harold, looking at Lottie and her splotchy red face, wasn't sure what to say. The garden was always Lottie's. She had been very clear for him to stay away from it; though he could fix a toilet, his big, clumsy hands couldn't care for a delicate flower. He did the only thing he knew how to and walked to his little old wife and held her in his arms. "You'll figure out what to do, sweetie. It's probably just some animal lookin' for some grub. It'll go away," he said with confidence, though truthfully he wasn't sure.

Every morning following, Lottie woke up to find more flowers strewn across her garden just as the day before. Having never been a fighting woman,

she wasn't sure how to handle the destructive intruder. It was always Harold's job to protect the house and her, but, this time, she found herself in her own, personal fight for her garden.

Sunday Supper with the family began just as every other Sunday supper. Lottie, her daughter Debbie, and granddaughters Lauren and Megan all stood about the kitchen cooking while the men lounged in the living room watching football.

"So, what's happenin' with your garden, Mama?" Debbie asked as she mashed the potatoes.

"Oh Sweetie, I don't know. Every mornin' it's the same thing, dead flower after dead flower," Lottie replied as she took the ham out of the oven.

Lauren and Megan both looked at their Grandmama. She was so old, small, and soft spoken. They knew how much time and care she put into keeping her flower garden. Never had she been this upset. Not even when their little brother, William, was pushed down by some bigger boys at the playground. And that time, she chased the boys out of the playground with her big, black purse.

"Let me know if there is anything I can do, Grandmama," Lauren said earnestly, helping Megan make the salad.

Halfway through supper, Lottie and her family heard the sound of something being knocked over outside. Instinctively, they turned to peer through the open window behind them, and there it was, the invader. Some brazen armadillo was digging up Lottie's garden.

Conversation at the table came to a halt and for a second Lottie froze. This was her moment. Lottie stood up, all 5'3, 130 pounds of her old, wrinkled body, and walked to the back of the house.

Megan looked at her Granddaddy, "What's she gonna to do?"

"Not sure sweetie, but I think your Grandmama has done lost her mind..." Harold got up to follow Lottie to the back and the rest of their family began to whisper. This behavior was so unlike their sweet Lottie they weren't sure what to do.

Harold found Lottie rummaging through their closet. "What in God's good name are you doin', baby? You're worryin' the children. Your new son in law's gonna start thinkin' he married into a bunch of crazy rednecks," he said, repressing his slight amusement with his wife.

"Leave me be, Harold, It's my garden... I'm the one who's got to deal with the damned creature," She said as she turned away from the closet and left the room.

Harold stood frozen staring after his wife for the space of heartbeat before

turning to follow her. Lottie walked past her family. They too froze with their mouths dropping open as they saw their Grandmama walking out of the house with a 12 gauge shotgun in her hand, still wearing her Sunday church clothes.

As she entered the garden, she and the armadillo exchanged a glance before it began to run into the pine trees.

"Get back here, gosh darn creature from hell!" Lottie bellowed as she ran to follow, leaving her family who followed her outside, speechless.

Lottie found her legs running faster than she thought possible, having not really used them to do so in many years. She stared the armadillo down, and it in return glanced back with beady, black eyes, tempting her on.

In that moment, Lottie made up her mind. She knew what had to be done, though she wasn't sure she could do it before... having never killed anything bigger than a bug.

Just as the armadillo reached its little hole in the ground home, so did Lottie. She stuck that shotgun in the hole, fired three rounds, and turned back to her family. "Well, that'll teach him," Lottie says handing the still warm shotgun to a stunned Harold.

She walked past her motionless family back into her now peaceful country home, victorious.

Careful, young queers--

Be loath to judge your fellow sistren

by those same standards of chastity
to which they hold the feminine race

For you have adolcesced with restraint

and now, advanced (with caution)

you have permission to defy presumptuous morality.

Break bridles, brothers--

Do not tame your hot, rosé flame

as though to broadcast yourself
were unforgivable

For you stand on the graves of your fathers

and bare(naked)backs of your uncles

who fought for you to be not ashamed.

Persevere, dear hearts--

Deny the God who denies you

and teaches his flocks of followers

to act with such callous indifference

For you are God's great creation

and your love is further (undeniable) proof

of glamour in divine design.







The shadows were still long when Caden finished his breakfast of egg and bread. He wiped his mouth with the cloth his mother had given him. At eleven years old, he had finally given up arguing that “table manners” were out of place when he was eating on the porch. Standing, he took his plate in to his mother, who smiled and kissed his forehead.

“Where’s Da?” he asked her, the last word segueing into a yawn. He was still sleepy, but knew he needed to help today. The storms that had ravaged the area for the last few days had likely damaged something. As the only other man in his family, Caden was the one his father relied on for help, and the one who would someday take over the farm. This was his duty.

“You know your father,” his mother sighed as she bustled around the kitchen, pausing to smile at her son only briefly, “he’s already outside. Seems like my men have a full day’s work cut out for them.” Her long, dark hair – the same shade as his own – was tied back from her face and neck, and swung wildly as she hurried around. “Could you hand me that pot, dear?” Caden passed it to her and waited a moment to see if she needed anything else. He was eager to help his father but did not want to abandon his mother should she need something else.

“I’m going to go help Da now,” he spoke up after a long moment. He hesitated briefly, making certain that there was no objection, then turned and hurried out the door. He heard his sister, Adanna, enter the kitchen with a loud “I’m hungry” as he left the house and was even more grateful for the escape.

The sun was already beating down on the little farm. It was late summer and, even after the rainstorms, a hot day was promised. A breeze ruffled Caden’s short brown hair as he rounded the house and paused to take in the scenery. The mild, fishy odor of the Interlude was noticeable – the river ran its course a few miles to the south, linking the Medak to the Red where it ran into Fountain Lake. It was this complex system which made the western plains of Leithanon so fertile and granted the Carsins family their livelihood. These plains stretched as far as the boy could see, and he had never been far enough from home to know anything else; though he had been told of the mountains to the north and west, to him they were simply a blur on the horizon.

His everyday realities consisted of his family, his home, and the farm. The land he knew was mostly flat, with a few places that seemed higher than the rest somehow. The Carsins’ home and barn stood on one of these hills, though the decline down to the crops somehow failed to justify the term. But the house and barn sat upon the rise in regal fashion to Caden’s mind; the expanse of crops an assembly of subjects, humbly kneeling as a breeze rolled through.

Remembering himself, Caden turned back toward the barn, a structure

larger than their own home, which housed their meager livestock, feed for the animals, and various farming implements. It was standing still, but the large front door had been blown off of the hinges. His father was standing where the doors should have been, leaning lightly on the frame. He was a large man with large shoulders. Caden had always envied the strength he'd witnessed in that back and those arms. That had all come from a life of labor, and so, even when it hurt, Caden refused to give in or complain. He would be just like his father.

His father pointed off to one side as Caden approached. Their old goat, Gabe, was grazing there. The boy felt his father place a hand on his shoulder as he knelt down beside him.

"Now," began his father, "what do you reckon knocked that door down? The wind or Gabe?" Caden laughed at the thought of the goat charging the door. Gabe was notoriously picky, and often vehement in his insistence for green grass over hay.

"I haven't seen any other damage," Caden's father said, "but I haven't had the time to check the crops. I won't have the time at all if I'm to fix this door today."

"Can I help?"

"Well, I don't think I could do it without you, son. You think you're ready to inspect your crops on your own?"

Caden nodded and his father could not tell whether the boy's hair danced because of his eagerness or the breeze that happened by. Caden's eyes were bright, almost like hazel diamonds, as the boy recognized an opportunity to prove himself.

"Yes," came the boy's firm reply.

"Good. Remember to watch your step. There's no telling what the rain might have driven away from the river. Be careful, son."

"Yessir," Caden replied, noting the sincere undertone of worry in his father's voice. There was a strong bond between them, and Caden knew that he was only being trusted with this by his own merit, and that was a point of pride for him. He would do anything to keep his father's trust. To make him proud.

"Alright, son. Hop to it. The sooner you finish, the sooner you can help me with this door." He ruffled his son's hair and smiled his proudest smile. Caden was energized by it, and hurried into the barn for a hoe before trotting down to the fields to begin his inspection.

The first thing he noticed was how wet the soil was. It was not simply wet or damp – it was saturated, which meant that the crops were in danger of drowning. His father would know what to do.

Since there was little he could do about the state of the soil, he started on the

oats. It was the Carsins' largest crop and their most valuable, not to mention the one closest to harvest. He glanced over every plant and scrutinized several, as he had seen his father do. He looked closely at the important things his father had shown him over the last few years. Everything appeared fine – the florets and stalks all green and lively, with no brown or red spots which would indicate a diseased plant. He did, however, find a caterpillar.

Caterpillars were pests to most farmers. Even Caden's father often said so. This was not without reason – Caden had seen them decimate leaves in moments. And yet the transformation they went through gave the boy pause every time he saw one. Unlike his sister, he understood that killing a caterpillar meant killing a butterfly. She thought the first disgusting and the second wonderful.

This sparked an idea in Caden's mind. He would take the caterpillar to one of the shrubs his mother kept and release it there, where it couldn't harm any crops. First, though, he would show it to Adanna.

He stuck the wriggly little bug in one of his pockets and hurriedly finished his inspection of the oats, then started toward the wheat. On his way he noticed some odd tracks in the dirt and knelt to inspect them. It was hard to tell here in the shade provided by the oats – especially since he was no tracker – but the markings seemed to weave and undulate. He was not sure what could make such tracks, but recalled his father's warning and vowed to be a bit more careful. He would report this to his father as well. They would probably need to keep Ada out of the fields for a bit, to be safe.

Caden moved carefully into and through the rows of wheat, which had been carefully seeded to give them room to walk amongst it. They grew almost as much wheat as they did oats. The grain was one of the nation's staple crops, and the straw ensured that draft animals had something to eat – especially when winter set in and the oats ran out. When he was halfway through with it, he heard his sister run out of the house giggling and the door slam shut.

"Come back here, missy!" his mother called. Caden could tell they were playing – his mother always tried to sound the most menacing when she wasn't being serious. "Adanna Carsins! Give me that!" The cries and laughter continued for a few minutes, accompanied at the end by the echoing reports of hammering up at the barn. As much as Caden wanted to know what was going on, he had a job to finish. He couldn't go back with the job half-done. That would be childish, he decided.

He continued inspecting the wheat for damage and rust, sniffing it here and there, enjoying the warm, fresh scent of greenery in the sunshine. The plants all seemed okay, though the soil was still thoroughly soaked. A prod with the

hoe revealed standing water when a little dirt was moved. Even so, he could report to his father that the tops of the plants were curling, meaning that it was getting nearer to harvest. As long as the soil dried quickly enough, the plants would survive.

As if to affirm his belief, a cry rang out from high above. The pitch of a falcon's keening. The ferocity of a dragon's roar. Nobody knew that cry better than a farmer, though Caden had heard it only once before in his life. He looked up, seeking out the emerald amongst the azure.

There, wheeling almost directly overhead, an ever-welcome holy messenger, was the wyvern. Its bright green scales, which associated it with the goddess Medin, glinted in the sunlight. Each of the Nine had his or her own color with which they were identified, and Medin was one of two goddesses who safeguarded agriculture. The draconic silhouette above promised Medin's protection to this farm and others in the area – rather, it seemed a reminder that the goddess had not let them down. In the midst of that silent green sea, Caden dropped to his knees to offer a prayer to the goddess and thank her, much as he knew the rest of his family was doing. The echoing hammer blows had halted. There were no cries from the women. The green wyvern's majesty demanded just that.

With another cry, the wyvern swooped low, and much of the excess water in the ground rose to the surface, drenching Caden's legs where he knelt as it flowed away. His jaw dropped as the only true damage the storm had threatened flowed away. The soil was still damp, but no longer soaked. Caden looked up in time to see the wyvern peel off and fly eastward.

Then it was gone.

Elated, and feeling untouchable, Caden moved on, finishing his inspection of the wheat before entering the much smaller plot of corn, though he was certain he would find nothing. A sense of responsibility still coerced him into beginning at the side farthest from the house and making certain that there was nothing wrong.

The corn was a cheaper sort of feed, used mostly to add to and “water down,” in a sense, the oats fed to livestock. The animals preferred the oats. Though some farmers had been known to save a few ears for themselves, Caden's father thought that eating corn was strange. Naturally, Caden felt the same. For this reason, he had once asked his father why they even bothered with growing corn. His father had pulled out a long word and tried to explain it to him. Eco... something, he thought to himself, remembering the lesson as he walked through the small jungle, and trying to recall the word. All that he



could firmly grasp was that it involved money.

He pushed the puzzling thoughts aside and focused on his task. The stalks had grown up over his head now, though not by much. It was easy to get lost in the corn. Especially when it was fully grown. He stood on tiptoe to inspect the top of a plant, then glanced back at the house and managed to pick it out beyond the stretch of green that was the cornfield, along with the oats that lay beyond.

He could hear his sister squealing again, and the hammering had resumed. The steady pounding seemed less weighty now. More carefree. The blows came more quickly and energetically than before, at a higher timbre. Caden knew his father would be pleased when he returned, and he looked forward to that.

In the midst of searching over a cornstalk, he heard his sister calling out to him, fairly close. She was likely hunting him out to exclaim over the arrival of the wyvern. For a moment he fought back a mild irritation that welled in the back of his head. He started to yell out at her to go back to the house when she screamed.

Caden paused a moment, unsure whether he'd actually heard a scream. In the momentary silence, he heard no hammer, no laughter – nothing until his sister screamed a second time. Gripping the hoe more tightly, Caden plowed from row to row, toward her terrified voice. The corn whipped him as he scurried through. He hit one stalk with his shoulder, breaking it, and slowed, wincing, as he hoped his father would forgive him. But Ada needed him, so he pushed himself onward. He heard his father calling intermittently between Ada's screaming and the rustling of his own frantic run through the cornfield.

Good, he thought, Da was coming.

The boy halted as his sister came into sight. Between them was a massive black serpent. Its body was easily as thick as Caden's torso, if not more. It was creeping slowly toward Ada, its head raised and its hood flared. It was a Subpent, one of those vicious beasts crafted by the goddess Suben to create chaos and death. Caden had seen one before – dead, as killed by an expedition of green-eyed clerics. Such groups were dispatched by Medin to patrol the area every year or two, as Suben enjoyed sending the monsters to farms under her protection.

Adanna stopped screaming when she saw him. Instead, she looked straight at him, her blue eyes glistening in terror, and begged for help. Caden saw the snake poised to lunge and raised the hoe, preparing to strike. Ada saw it as well, and squealed again.

Then their father was there, having come from the other direction, and hurling Ada away from the beast. Startled by the sudden movement, the snake

struck. It latched onto their father's shoulder as Caden cried out. Blood leapt from the snake's jaws and the sound of bones snapping, splintering, rattled Caden to his core. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ada roll to her feet and hurry toward the house.

Desperate to save his father now, he rushed forward and hacked at the monstrous serpent with the hoe, but the blade simply bounced off with a metallic clang. The Subpent threw Caden's father aside and turned to face its attacker. Caden noticed as his father hit the ground that his right arm was no longer attached.

A turbulent mixture of emotion flooded the boy — terror and rage being the predominant ones. He leapt to the side as the serpent reared and struck again. As he rolled to his feet, he planted himself between the beast and his father. His father sputtered behind him, the words inaudible. Caden kept his attention on the Subpent, though, as it turned. He swung again, and the blade connected with the side of the Subpent's mouth. Caden felt the handle of the hoe crack and give as a single scale shattered and flew away, joined by the blade of the hoe. Caden now held a sharp stick. His heart sank as the serpent hissed and reared again.

He took a step back, closer to his father. He wanted to run. But he couldn't leave his father here.

"Da?" he managed, hoping his father would give up the ruse soon. He knew that he had a plan. His father always had a plan, and now he was tricking the serpent somehow...

But his father only groaned.

Caden kept the sharp end of the pole pointed at the Subpent and waited. The serpent saw the fear and lunged, sensing its next meal was surely won. Caden screamed, gripped tightly to the pole and jabbed out instinctively. He saw it enter the beast's mouth, felt his arm break as the serpent's weight bore down first on the pole, then on him. He heard the lower half of the snake's body thrashing through the corn, felt the ground jump beneath him every time the massive tail struck it.

Then it was all black.

The first clear image to make it through the pain was his mother's face as she looked into his, then directed Ada to help her roll the snake off of him.

"Ma..." he managed weakly, "where's Da?"

Her response echoed in his ears, and he couldn't quite make it out, but a flick of her eyes told him. Caden looked in that direction, saw his father still lying on the ground. As soon as he was free, he stumbled over to him. The big man was still breathing, and his mother had managed to wrap the injured

shoulder enough to temporarily stem the bleeding. But he was alive.

"Caden, let me see your arm," his mother was saying. Caden complied, but wouldn't move from his father's side, silent tears of pain and relief intermingling as they trailed slowly down his cheeks.

"Caden?" Adanna frowned, looking down at his pants. "What's that?" He followed her gaze to find the gooey remains of the caterpillar oozing from his pocket.

The only part I enjoyed about our relationship
was you waking me up every Tuesday and
Thursday morning at 5 am, so we could run
in the sprinklers together, hand in hand.

Fingers clamped not clasped, you raced to the
second story of our Wildwood apartment and
spread your arms like an eagle's wingspan
over the balcony and asked me if

I'd catch

you

if

you'd fall.

You did not wait for my response
and I have now just learned to forgive you. And the
only part I enjoyed about your death was the center
of your hand forever embedded with the sprinkler as
it spit your blood and water into the grass and knowing
I no longer had to worry about having to hold your hand.



I want to put one minute in my pocket,
Next to my chapstick,
Old button,
And pens.
It's 4:17 in the morning,
Nothing special,
But it means that we're more than,
"just friends."

Covers kicked off,
And the room is too hot,
I feel safe with you on my skin.
But a phone goes off,
And our lips break apart,
as I reach towards the edge of my bed.
A message not worth remembering,
A waste of my time,
What matters is your hand on my hip.
You flip me back and to my surprise,
You don't jump straight for my lips.

The moment turns slow,
You pull my head close,
And that's when I feel it begin,
You open your lips,
Say,

"don't get attached"
Then drown me in kisses again.

In my dream one evening, Jesus walked from room to room handing out cups. "Take this cup from me," he said as he held it out, blue and plastic. "The keg's out on the back porch."

I sat with one hand curled around this cup's midsection. My other hand was fending off something invisible. It's hard to say what was making me afraid -- I just know that I never paused to think about it. It seemed that if I paused to think about it, all things would be worse, when probably the opposite was true.

I tried to stand up. It was easier than I thought it'd be, and the momentum I summoned to bring me upright was overmuch. I toppled forward onto the carpet. This was okay; there was nothing in the cup to spill, and I hadn't yet said anything to suggest I could sustain a personality. In fact, no noise of any kind issued from my body. I was in the clear.

Just to be safe, I decided to stay floorbound. I crawled into the pantsleg forest on three limbs, cup-hand in front, like some impoverished animal. From here, it was hard to see where the exits were. The smells were different (spoiler alert: It wasn't a dream, it was foreshadowing -- the kind of foreshadowing where everything comes to pass exactly as you hope it won't).

The solution, or the resolution, depending on which half of your brain you decide to choose, is to recycle your cups. Better yet, institute a Bring Your Cup to Work Day at your local workplace. Cease this daily bailing yourself out of the flood of possibilities -- you should be taking shorter showers anyway -- with cup after cardboard cup. Think of the children (they're not thinking of you).

You crawl into a corner. This hand with the cup is really cramping your style. "Christ," you think, "if someone would just freaking hold this for me while I call a cab. If only I knew someone here. If only I were sweeter."

"I think he went to the bathroom," says a girl above you. Her mouth is dusty. "He's been there a while. I wish he'd come back, 'cause he took all the cups."

This night will end as most nights do for you -- a drive, a snack, an episode of something flashy. You can't see it or believe it from where you're crouched, but you will manage to traverse the minutes between where you are and where you will be. Also you'll end up leaving the cup in someone else's car, distracted by fond thoughts of someone great, *someone who's doing an unselfish thing right now while saying something hilarious*, you'll bet.

All of this is fine, for however long it happens to you.

Fall would soon be knocking at our front door, but its winds had already come around the house to find my father and I sitting in the backyard. They were soon making a game of running over our bare feet under our bare arms, around our bare necks, and past our dry lips where they met with our expelled breaths and pulled them out of our bodies to cool off and play. Charcoal, the family mutt, trots over to meet us. An elderly dog, 84 in his own years, he struggles just to sit. My father, man of about 60 with grey hairs on his black head, looks at the ground with the red dead leaves in the lean green grass.

With the last of my strength I scan the final words of a copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* lying in my lap before slouching back in my seat. Malcolm had returned his Hajj to Mecca with an outlook on the world that contradicted his entire life leading up to that point, and as history would have it, that old life of his would come back to end him.

As blank pages at the end were blown closed by the wind, I turn the book over to its back to read the summary and reviews.

Charcoal came up next to my father and took on the arthritic burden of relaxing. My father looked at the old dog struggling to simply lay on the ground and asked, "you tired?" To that, the dog glanced at him and yawned. "Me too," he replied. I looked over to them with an entire life story rolling in my head and said, "Me three." With all members in agreement we nodded off to sleep.

As we slept, Dusk and Midnight silently traded post in spite of our awareness and concerns. When I awoke in the middle of the night I was jolted to my feet by a severe chill that had crept up on me like a phone call from Winter. Dusk had gone without even a wave. I slept as the sundry glow silently eloped with the sunset. I was about to run back to the house, which my mother had left well lit and warmed to Receive Fall, but realized my father was still asleep. He was sitting there very still and quiet, not two feet from the old mutt who was just as still and quiet. I saw that his situation was shrouded in darkness and cold, and it disturbed me to witness his quiet contentment.

I roused him from his stillness and directed him back to the house. As we were going in through the door, Charcoal brought me the autobiography which had fallen from my lap in my waking. Having fetched the book as he had once done in the games of his youth, the old boy was now in a good humor.

No sooner had my father and I closed the door behind us that a chipper new chill blew in to greet my old dog. When I turned to look through the window of the door, I saw that the wintery whelps were enthusiastically lapping at his maw, and he received them with a gentle pant that related to them how there were days when he too had been a pup.

He clasps her hand and holds out the ring
She starts to dance and starts to sing
“You are my husband, and I’ll be your wife.
You have to vow to love me the rest of your life.”

They play dress up and put on their costumes.
She dabs on her make-up and her mom’s perfume.
They are adults leaving adolescence behind,
Really they’re 9-years-old, but 21 in their minds.

He has his tie and his dad’s shiny shoes.
They both have their jobs they can’t wait to do.
“I’m going to be a lawyer,” he assumes.
“And I’ll stay home and clean all the rooms.”

She wrings the clothes in her hands,
And does all the gestures she understands.
He scribbles on papers and wags his finger,
“A working man!” And a dead-ringer.

He has worked all day, or so they simulate.
She takes his coat and asks how was his day?
He feigns a sigh and complains of his feet.
She fakes a frown and insists on being sweet.

They play doctor after they eat.
What that entails, they cannot conceive.
They undress and bewilderingly grope one another,
Thinking that’s all it means to be a lover.

It’s now late as they lie in their consecrated bed.
Before they go to sleep, she turns to him and says:
“Now I’m going to be a mother and you will be a daddy.”
She laid there and talked of her fated happy family.

That night she blissfully went to sleep,
Having not one reason to weep,
And not one worry in her heart,
not one of the pains that come with her part.

You're an ice cream cone

Delicious, cool, and sweet --

But after the fun, you melt and run

At the slightest hint of heat.

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